

PLOTS News and Changes for 2005

Photo by Nate Harling

The *Working Lands Program* is the newest program added to the menu of choices the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Private Land Initiative (PLI) has available to landowners. Working Lands is a short-term program based on the wildlife value of lands actively being farmed or ranched. The current farming or ranching management practices of the lands are evaluated by biologists, who place values on components such as conservation practices, good stewardship and quality of hunting habitat and public access.

- **State law restricts nonresident hunting on PLOTS and WMAs. Nonresidents are not allowed to hunt on conservation PLOTS and Department lands from October 8, 2005 through October 14, 2005.** Nonresidents are welcome to hunt these lands for the remainder of the hunting seasons.



- The Mule Deer Foundation's Northern Badlands Chapter of Bismarck, North Dakota, has given a grant to the PLOTS program to help the Department manage mule deer populations and their habitats on private land. The grant will allow for more effective habitat development on private land, as well as provide hunters access which will contribute to mule deer harvest. Conceivably, the MDF would like to provide a grant to the PLOTS program on an annual basis with the amount based on money generated from the chapter's annual fund-raising events.

- **New Legislation Does Not Affect Off-Trail Use on PLOTS.** HB 1239, recently signed into law during the 59th Legislative Assembly, allows off-trail vehicle travel for small game hunting on private land in North Dakota. The new law allows the use of a motor-driven vehicle to be used off-trail for small game hunting by the landowner or lessee and others who have written permission of the landowner or lessee.
- The Department, through contract, is the lessee for hunting access on lands enrolled in the PLOTS program. An important goal of PLOTS is to provide the public with WALK-IN hunting opportunities for hunting and fishing on private land. Because the WALK-IN provision of our program is a cornerstone of our relationship with the landowner, it is the Department's policy to continue to allow WALK-IN ACCESS ONLY on PLOTS, unless the area is marked with a green sign indicating: ATTENTION WATERFOWL HUNTERS—VEHICLE ACCESS HAS BEEN GRANTED BY THE LANDOWNER. In this case, permission to drive off-trail for waterfowl hunting only on PLOTS has been granted by the landowner, however, this does not include small game hunting. If no green signs are present on the area, then under no circumstance may a hunter drive on any PLOTS without written permission from the landowner.
- Updates and/or changes to the PLOTS Guide can be viewed on our website at: www.discovernd.com/gnf.



New Legislation Offers a Chance for Rural Communities to Draw Hunters



Access to private land getting more difficult

Due to abundant wildlife populations in North Dakota, another great hunting season is anticipated for 2005. Along with the anticipation comes planning. Prior to the hunting season, some hunters may have already made contacts with landowners for access to private land. While many hunters have connections with landowners through friends or relatives, many others do not. For most people, finding a place to hunt is getting more difficult each year. PLOTS is an option that ensures access to private land for all hunters. However, the program should not be a cure-all for all hunters, rather just one more option when looking for a place to hunt. Even with PLOTS tracts being found throughout the state, the Department continues to urge hunters to build relationships with landowners. Some communities and landowners are concerned that hunters are having such a difficult time finding a place to hunt, they may quit coming to their community altogether to hunt. Many small towns and local communities rely on hunters in the fall to bring an economic boost to cafes, motels, gas stations and other businesses.

What is the Private Land Community Match Bill?

In the 2005 legislative session, HB 1189, also called the private land community match bill, was passed. This bill will give communities a chance to supplement Department funds with local matching funds, thus providing additional incentive payments to landowners who enroll land into PLOTS near their community. The hope is that by providing more access to private land for hunting in a community, hunters will bring more business to motels, cafes, gas stations and other businesses. The bill was passed by the House and Senate, and has been signed into law by Governor John Hoeven.

How does a community participate?

If a community is interested in providing local matching funds to draw hunters, they start by contacting the Department. Once a community has indicated interest in the program, the Department will work with them to determine the amount of local match funding available from the community. Wildlife clubs, motels, individual businesses, chambers, and others across the state are eligible to participate. For example, funds from a local wildlife club on one end of the state can be used for incentive payments to landowners on the other end of the state.

Habitat criteria and guidelines

Guidelines were established in the bill, and any community in the state is eligible. The Department will give higher preference to lands located within designated priority areas, where the demand for access is the greatest. The Department's habitat criteria and guidelines for current PLOTS programs will be used. Land will be evaluated by a Department private land biologist and the landowner will receive 100 percent of the normal PLOTS program payment. Additional incentive payments will come from local matching funds. The Department will work with communities in advance to establish the incentive payment, based on the amount of local matching funds available. If the local match meets one-third, or greater, of the agreements total cost, local communities may decide if the land is open to nonresidents during the first week of the pheasant season. The Department's private lands staff is developing the final guidelines for this program and it should be available for signup in the spring of 2006. Communities should start making plans now to participate in the community match program. **For more information on participating in this program, please contact the Game and Fish Department at 701-328-6300 or discovernd.com/gnf.**

Private Land Initiative

Photo by Craig Bihrl

The Department's mission is to protect, conserve, and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for sustained public use. The **Private Land Initiative** is the Department's over-all mechanism for applying this mission onto the private landscape. **The PLI has three main goals:**

1. Conserve habitat for fish and wildlife populations.
2. Provide landowners interested in wildlife conservation with cost-sharing assistance for developing and protecting wildlife habitat.
3. Provide the public with opportunities to access fish and wildlife resources on private land.

Conservation PLOTS (Private Land Open To Sportsmen) Agreements are one of the ways the Department accomplishes this mission. Within the PLOTS program there are several types of agreements that producers can choose from:

- The **Habitat Plot program** is designed to be a multi-year rental program of three to six years or 10-20 year agreements that help to create, enhance or protect wildlife habitat while providing public access.
- The **Food Plot program** is a short-term program that provides a wildlife food source and public access.
- The **Private Forest Conservation program** is a multi-year rental program that works to provide protection and enhancement in unique forested systems and also provides for public access.
- The **CRP Cost-Sharing program** provides assistance with establishment and management costs associated with the CRP in exchange for public access. The objective of this program is to improve public access in areas where it has traditionally been limited.
- The **WRP (Wetlands Reserve Program) Incentive** is a partnership program between NRCS and the Department, which provides additional incentives to producers enrolling their land in WRP. The primary purpose of WRP Incentive is to restore, protect or enhance wetlands and associated uplands, as well as provide for public access.
- The **Tree Planting Cost-Sharing program** provides assistance with the establishment costs of tree plantings. The goal of this program is to enhance wildlife habitat and conservation on private land and provide public access.
- The **Working Lands Program (WLP)** is a short-term program based on the wildlife value of lands actively farmed or ranched while providing public access. The current farming or ranching management practices of the lands are evaluated by biologists, who place values on components such as conservation practices, good stewardship and quality of hunting habitat and public access.
- The **CREP/CoverLocks for Conservation** partners with USDA's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to establish 20-acre habitat complexes (10 acres grass, five acres trees and five acres food plots) along priority watersheds and provides public access to the 160 acres encompassing the complex for 30 years.
- The Department also works with other state and federal agencies, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Natural Resources Trust, Mule Deer Foundation, Pheasants for the Future and local wildlife clubs to carry out wildlife habitat projects on some PLOTS.

Conservation PLOTS Funding Sources and Philosophy



Conservation PLOTS is your program. Funding for Conservation PLOTS is generated from the sale of habitat stamps, interest accrued from the Department's general fund balance, and special legislative appropriations. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of every hunting license goes toward a Private Land Habitat and Access Improvement Fund. The Department operates its Private Land Initiative (PLI) out of this fund, creating or managing wildlife habitat and providing access to private land for hunting and fishing. Five full-time employees in the Department's Bismarck office head up this initiative and administer its budget, while seven full-time employees, located in district field offices, work with district biologists, technicians and local landowners to provide for program delivery across the state.

The pie chart shown below shows the number of acres enrolled in the major Conservation PLOTS programs. Each program includes hunting access as a component, however, habitat development, maintenance and management are also major objectives of our programs. Habitat-based private land programs present the Department and the landowner with an opportunity to develop and protect wildlife habitat on private land and provide public access to fish and wildlife populations.

For the 2005 hunting season, the Department's PLI program has acquired access to over **803,000** acres of private land. The Department provides incentives to landowners who are interested in wild-

life conservation practices on their land and allow public access for hunting. Some examples of these conservation practices, which landowners can be compensated for, may include cost sharing, where the Department pays a portion of



the landowners grass seed, trees/shrubs or wildlife food plots in exchange for hunting access; habitat rental programs, which encourage landowners to leave habitat intact by not haying or grazing; habitat development and maintenance programs, which help landowners convert previously farmed cropland to grass or trees providing nesting habitat, winter cover and escape cover for wildlife.

These conservation practices are funded by money generated from hunting license sales. The return investment from habitat-based access programs is tremendous and benefits the landowner, wildlife, and hunters.

2005 PLOTS Acres

